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ABSTRACT

According to a footnote in the 1990 book "The Noble Savage," "The Spanish Black Legend is the view of Spain's genocide in The New World, as accounted for by Bartolome de las Casas and the European historians who, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, denounced this genocide, often utilizing it as an anti-Spanish propaganda tool" used by the English. This anti-Spanish feeling is more than evident in De Crevecoeur's "Letters from an American Farmer," in which, for instance, narrator James points out the decadence of Lima (Peru). Unfortunately, the legacy of this Black Legend remains with the American culture today. Consider the distaste the dominant culture feels for the stereotype of the "pachuco," the cocky young Chicano male. Or consider this anecdote: during a portion of the Penn State Conference on Chicano/a and Latino/a literature, Paul Lauter pointed out that when he, as a Jewish child growing up in Brooklyn, had to decide which language to study, the answer was simple--French. Spanish was regarded as "declasse." (Contains 11 references.) (TB)

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"Moving Beyond the Black Legend: Chicano/a and Latino/a Literature"

-- Dennis Moore, Florida State University

Good morning. On the Op-Ed page of the Tuesday, April 5 New York Times, the author of the recent book The Language Instinct, Steven Pinker of MIT, discusses euphemisms and so-called "P.C." problems with some relish. Another major newspaper's style manual frowns on "'New World,'" Pinker says: "([it] ignores the indigenous culture that preceded Columbus's voyage) and 'Dutch treat' (offensive, presumably, to Netherlanders). But I doubt," he muses, "if Americans associate the dozen-odd idioms in which Dutch means 'ersatz' ('Dutch uncle,' 'Dutch oven') with the Dutch; presumably," he goes on to say, "the sting has worn off in the three centuries since the English coined such terms to tweak their naval rivals."

This morning I will focus briefly on another set of references that we can trace back to a rivalry much larger than the one to which Pinker refers: that between the English and the Spanish, the conflict that has led to our vaguely associating the numbers "one five eight eight" with the expression "Spanish Armada." Here's the especially succinct beginning of a footnote

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from the 1990 book The Noble Savage: "The Spanish Black Legend is the view of Spain's genocide in The New World, as accounted for by Bartolomé de las Casas and the European historians who, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, denounced this genocide, often utilizing it as an anti-Spanish propaganda tool" (Cro 9, n. 9). Historian John Elliott provides a more detailed description, which I've photocopied onto the back of this hand-out; see the sentence that begins at the bottom of the left-hand page? "The atrocities of [Sir Francis] Drake [?1540-96] entered the collective mentality of the Castilians, just as the Florida massacre or the San Juan de Ulúa affair entered the collective mentality of the England of Elizabeth. But, in the nature of things, the Spaniards offered many more hostages to fortune than their rivals. Although the Black Legend possessed a long, if hardly respectable, European ancestry, the Spanish record in the Indies gave it a new and terrifying lustre" (94-95). Rather than reading further here, allow me to quote from a more recent source that also refers to the England of Elizabeth and her immediate successors, an article whose title begins with a vivid example of the essentialist accusations at the heart of the Black Legend: Karen Cunningham's "'A Spanish Heart in an English Body': The Ralegh Treason Trial and the Poetics of Proof," from the Fall 1992 Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies. That vivid expression in her title comes from Edward Coke, the imposing attorney for the crown in that 1603 treason trial; on behalf of James I, Coke was confronting this courtier whose reputation rested partly on his having, as Cunningham writes, "[t]ime and

again ... schemed and sailed off to expand the empire and thwart Spanish domination of the New World" (329). Basically, "[t]he crown contended that Ralegh [and two aristocrats caught up in the so-called "Treason of the Priests"] were discontented with James's treatment of them and thus conspired with a Spanish ambassador to fund dissident forces in England and to put Lady Arabella Stuart on the throne" (332-33). To claim, then, that Raleigh had "A Spanish heart in an English body" is quite an insult, and quite a precise one at that.

As you can see, my focus in these brief remarks is on connections between Chicano/a and Latino/a literature and the materials we glibly describe as "traditional." So, would Crèvecoeur and his contemporaries have known about these details of Sir Walter Raleigh's misfortune? It doesn't matter, really, because they would have imbibed so much anti-Spanish propaganda that they would've absorbed these over-simplified associations: Spanish is bad and English is good; the Catholic culture of Spain sends conquistadors to the New World, bent on conquest and pillage, while the sturdy English send people intent on purifying the already-Protestant church and, frankly, determined to establish a citty upon a hill. It seems clear, in light of this notion of a Black Legend, that there's a bit more than meets the eye -- more than meets our late-twentieth-century eyes, at least -- going on in the opening of Crèvecoeur's "Letter III," in his 1782 collection, Letters from an American Farmer. Characteristically, his rhetoric involves juxtaposing Entity A and Entity

B. We often call the selection "The Charles Town Letter," and one of the entities he's contrasting in the opening paragraph is South Carolina's bustling port city. His opening statement spells out the equation: "Charles Town is, in the north, what Lima is in the south" (166). Referring to Charleston as northern is, of course, disorienting -- especially for readers already accustomed to thinking of America as only the British colonies strung along the Atlantic coast of North America. South of Charleston, though, as Crèvecoeur's disingenuous narrator Farmer James points out, and south of here, is gaudy Lima: "Peru abounding in gold, Lima is filled with inhabitants who enjoy all those gradations of pleasure, refinement, and luxury which proceed from wealth." The point of stereotypically linking Charleston with Spain's viceregal capital in the Americas in this way is guilt by association: if one is, as we know, decadent, then isn't the other as well? After all, we also refer to this frequently anthologized selection in terms of its most sensationalized scene, the "caged-slave episode." In that confrontation, Crèvecoeur forces his reader to deal with the horrors of slavery -- horrors for which he has begun preparing the reader in that opening paragraph. These allusions to the corruption of the Spanish are drawing on the associations cultivated in the preceding centuries as part of this very effective propaganda we know as "the Black Legend."

Does it still survive? One way to check is to think about the distaste our dominant culture feels for the stereotype of the

pachuco, the cocky young Chicano male. There are far less flattering terms, beginning perhaps with "wetback" and working their way down; if you don't believe me, go talk with some of the racist folks in green uniforms patrolling la frontera down in El Paso or, I'm told, out in San Diego.

I know that, à la Joel Fineman's essay, we expect anecdotes at the beginning of an essay rather than at the end of such brief remarks as these, but let me retell a story that Paul Lauter told last summer. It was the first morning of the Penn State conference, and Teresa McKenna had us sitting in a circle introducing ourselves and saying what we wanted to get out of several days' intensive scrutiny of chicano/a and latino/a literature. As you might guess, I mentioned being interested in the Black Legend (and also said that it would be fascinating to learn a bit more about magical realism, which Houston Baker had linked with Toni Morrison in his dazzling opening-night talk). Paul Lauter was sitting in our session, so when we got around to him, he said that as a Jewish kid growing up in Brooklyn, he had faced that age-old middle-class question: "What foreign language you going to study, kid?" The answer, he says, was obvious for a Jewish kid growing up in Brooklyn: French. Obviously, that is, it wouldn't be Spanish, which people understood to be declassé. Sounds to me as if the Black Legend is still at work.

Thank you.

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